Jonathan Hay  
Early Ming Beijing: What Did It Look Like?

I want to use the first meeting of the workshop to introduce a multi-year research project on the city of Beijing that I am initiating this Fall. Although the project is beginning as a personal one, I mean it quickly to become collaborative, bringing together Chinese scholars in Beijing with scholars outside China.

I have been asking myself: What did Beijing look like twenty or thirty years after it formally became the Ming capital in 1421? In other words, when Ming dynasty Beijing was new, and was no longer simply a construction site; when trees had had time to grow, and residential areas had had time to take shape, what did the city look like? Although my experience of and love for the city go back almost forty years, I can’t answer the question. All I am sure of is that what we have been able to see with our own eyes, and what has been documented photographically since the late 19th century, is not a good guide. The city was extensively remade under the Qing dynasty, so much so that early Ming Beijing is difficult to imagine. I think I have stumbled on to a good research question. But it’s a very big one, so I have tried to break it down into smaller questions that might be easier to answer, focusing on the imperial dimension of the city.

On a recent visit to Beijing with my wife, Nimali remarked on the way in from the airport that the city was much greener than she had expected. Her comment immediately brought to the front of my mind an awareness that until then had been latent. Precisely because Beijing is a dusty city, rulers and residents put a great deal of effort into making the city as green as possible. When the Yongle emperor moved the capital to Beijing (over fifteen years between about 1407 and 1421), he framed the imperial palace (the Forbidden City) within a landscape of parks and lakes to the immediate east, west, and north. The northern part of this area soon filled up with temples and the mansions of princes, aristocrats, and high government officials, all with gardens. This urban landscape environment has survived partially intact. It has many echoes within the Forbidden City itself, not least in the palace's gardens and temples. Also relevant here are the groves of now ancient trees planted in formal arrangements that can still be seen at imperial sites like the Temple of Heaven. Let’s call this aspect of the city proper “green Beijing.” A variety of specific questions come to mind. What was the prehistory of the Ming landscape environment in Jin Zhongdu (1153-1214) and
Yuan Dadu (1260-1368)? What models did Ming planners have in mind? Did they have the streets and hutongs planted with trees? If so, what kind of trees? Can one write an art history of trees?

Serendipity also suggested a second approach. I have just written a book on surfaces in the decorative arts in which one chapter is devoted to surfaces that foreground the inherent patterning of the material used. On the same visit to Beijing, Nimali and I visited the Temple of Heaven, where I was especially struck by the use of stone slabs at that site. These slabs, which were clearly carefully chosen for their material patterning, were used to mark the axis along which the Emperor would have moved, and also to give a floor to the Altar itself. I don’t know of any art historical discussion of these stones, even though it must have been a major enterprise to find them and bring them to the site. (Do they predate the Ming? What parts of China do they come from?) The symbolism—the stones make visible cosmic process, and perhaps also represent the empire if the stones come from far away—is not what interests me. What I care about more is the fact that an imperial architectural monument was conceived partly in surface terms. Monuments, like decorative objects, have surfacescapes. So, too, do cities. For example, the great Bell Tower and Drum Tower that end the central axis of Beijing in the north stand on a natural raised platform. The existence of this raised terrain was one of the starting points for the planning of Ming Beijing. I’m calling this aspect of the Ming imperial city “surfacescape Beijing.” What are its various aspects?

Serendipity strikes again. When Nimali and I visited the Forbidden City, I studied yet again the great marble terraces that frame the three interrelated palaces at the center of the complex. They are punctuated by waterspouts in the form of so-called dragon heads. But on this visit it seemed to me that they didn’t look like dragons so much as makaras—mythic sea monsters. Which might mean that the clouds carved on the balustrades are actually sea mist. An intriguing possibility when one reminds oneself of the great sea voyages of Zheng He between 1405 and 1433. As it happened, Nimali and I a few months later went to visit the Jayasinghe and Ranasignhe families in Sri Lanka. There I found very similar makara waterspouts in palace complexes dating from centuries earlier, as well as a stele erected by Zheng He in Arabic, Tamil, and Chinese on the occasion of one of his voyages. Can one speak, then, of a “maritime Beijing” as well that could be charted across the symbolic forms of imperial monuments? Maritime Beijing would also include the lakes mentioned earlier, because they were (and are)
known not as lakes but seas. Maritime Beijing might also include certain Buddhist monuments, built on a south Asian model known through maritime connections. Questions abound. Was there a maritime Dadu under the Yuan dynasty? Are the wave patterns on blue and white porcelain part of the same symbolic system? How else was Ming sea power relevant to the dynastic capital?

Green Beijing, surfacescape Beijing, maritime Beijing—potentially, these are three completely different ways of understanding the Ming imperial dimension of the city in the fifteenth century before it took on the Qing form that survived into modern times. Could these approaches contribute to a flexible framework for a larger collaborative project involving many scholars? I have commissioned a large number of photographs to make my points, many of which I will incorporate into the discussion on September 9.

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